11th American Lit/Sidell Washington Irving: “The Devil and Tom Walker” Study Guide

1. Why are Tom and his unnamed wife perfect for each other? What are the personality traits they share that make them a good match for each other?

2. How does the Walker house and property reflect the people who live there?

3. How does Washington Irving help build mood and suspense through description of the setting to *foreshadow that something evil* will occur in the swamp?

4. What is Tom’s treatment of the skull he finds with the tomahawk buried in it and how does this reinforce his characterization?

5. This short story is a satire; how does Irving depict the element of religious and moral hypocrisy that he believed existed in the new America?

6. What does Tom notice about most of the tall trees that were in the swamp? How might this be a metaphor?

7. How does Washington Irving incorporate into this story his views on how the white men treated the Native people?

8. What is Mrs. Walker’s immediate reaction when she is told about her husband’s interactions in the woods? What sin(s) is she guilty of?

9. Why does Tom reject his wife’s request?

10. What is Tom’s immediate reaction when he realizes his wife is first missing?

11. What is his reaction when he realizes that she is dead?

12. What does Tom find in the checkered apron?

13. How does Washington Irving incorporate his views on the slave trade into the story? (What is his opinion of this institution?)

14. What deal does Tom make with the Devil? Be specific.

15. When Tom acquires money, how does he behave? How does he treat others?

16. What paradoxes (contradictions) exist regarding Tom’s lifestyle once he acquires money? (In other words, what about his behavior and choices seem to be in direct opposition to each other?)

17. What happens to Tom and all his property in the end?

18. Towards the end of the short story, what reference does Irving make to the lunacy of Salem?

19. What is the “deadly sin” that moves this story forward? What effect does this negative trait have on the society at the time?

20. Considering Tom’s fate, what is the lesson Irving wants his readers to learn from the story? Create a motto or moral for this story.

21. Do you think Tom’s conversion to religion is genuine? Why or why not?

22. Why is Tom called “the universal friend of the needy”? Is Tom actually a friend? Why or why not?

23. What statement does Tom make that leads to the end of his life and the loss of his ill-gotten wealth?

24. Name two things you learn from the third person omniscient narrator about Tom Walker’s character AND his wife’s character. Support your answer with references from the story.

25. Name two things you learn about Tom Walker through indirect characterization.

27. What inference can you draw of the New Englander’s cultural attitudes toward the woods from such descriptions as “black smothering mud,” “dark and stagnant pools,” the “sudden screaming of the bittern, and “great gloomy pines and hemlocks”?

28. What inferences can you draw about the cultural attitudes of New Englanders from Tom’s sudden attention to the bible and attendance of church, following his deal with the Devil?

29. Who is Faust?